

3-1998

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Recommended Citation

Grant, Ben Z. (1998) "The Official State Dish: Why Chili?," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 36: Iss. 1, Article 12.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol36/iss1/12>

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THE OFFICIAL STATE DISH: WHY CHILI?

by Ben Z. Grant

Chili was “born” in San Antonio, but the idea to make it the official state dish of Texas came from East Texas. It is on my soul that twenty years ago I authored House Resolution 13 of the 65th Session of the Texas Legislature, which officially declared this to be so. This is the way I remember it happening.

Prior to the legislative session, Albert Agnor, known affectionately as “The ole Aggie,” contacted me about making the farkleberry the official state berry of Texas. Albert had just won the world championship in chili cooking, and his magic ingredient was the farkleberry. With a little research, I soon determined that *farkleberry* was just a fancy word for what I grew up calling a winter huckleberry.

In respect for Albert’s position as champion of the world, which most people never achieve in any field, I ran the idea by several of my fellow legislative colleagues. By the time they finished laughing, I fully understood that the Texas Legislature was not likely to take the farkleberry seriously.

I had tilted windmills before, plus an attic fan or two, but I decided that I did not wish to glory in defeat even with the farkleberry on my side. I could not help but think of former Vice President John Nance Garner. When he was in the Texas Legislature he took on the official state flower, the bluebonnet, and tried to replace it with the flower of the prickly pear cactus. He not only failed, he also acquired the nickname “Cactus Jack” for his effort. I knew in my heart that I did not want to be remembered as “Farkleberry” Ben.

Don’t get me wrong. I have nothing personal against the berry. The taste of it beckons boyhood memories of the many times that I enjoyed the berries straight from the bush as my dessert or in-between meals snack. But in my humble opinion, it just was not destined to be anything official.

But chili as a prospective candidate – that was another matter. I used to have a friend named Charles Ramsdale, who lived just a stein’s throw from the ancient Scholtz Beer Garten in Austin. In Charlie’s book on San Antonio, he declared that *chili con carne* was truly a Texas dish, having its origin in San Antonio in the 1880s. *Chili* is the Aztec Indian word for the pepper that we use as the spicy ingredient of chili. According to Charles, the first recorded reference to the use of the chili pepper was when the Aztecs sprinkled it on the meat from some unfortunate conquistadors. With history on my side, I resolved to make chili the official state dish of Texas.

Albert agreed with this change and came to Austin to cook a giant pot of chili that would open the sinuses of the entire Legislature. A delegation from the Marshall Chamber of Commerce came, and Lady Bird Johnson, Harrison County’s favorite daughter, joined us for the occasion. It was a successful bit of lobbying, and the resolution sailed through committee and was set for floor debate by the calendar committee. I asked Rep. Ron Bird to co-author the

resolution because he was from San Antonio, the true birthplace of chili, and because we had been a successful team on several pieces of legislation.

The night before the House vote, the chili-heads of Texas, wearing T-shirts saying, "Legalize chili," converged on Austin. They made a ton pot of chili down on the Colorado River, using rakes to stir it and water hoses to liquefy it. It was not accepted as a world record by Guinness, who said that they lacked data on such endeavors, and in truth the taste suggested a lack of quality control in the cooking. But it was a great celebration.

By the time the resolution reached the floor, there was a stack of proposed amendments. Some of the house members from the Beaumont-Port Arthur area offered an amendment to change the dish to shrimp gumbo; some of the Hispanic members offered menudo as a substitute; some of the black delegation offered chitterlings; and a Republican proposed chateaubriand. Most of these were ethnic or regional, but none had the universality of chili. Some members pulled down their amendments and the rest were defeated. But then came the challenge by the very popular dish of barbecue, which had received national attention when LBJ was president.

I told the House how chili had begun as a poor man's solution for preparing tough beef, how Kit Carson's dying words were to ask for just one more bowl of chili, how Lyndon Johnson had said anything outside of Texas pretending to be chili was just a poor substitute for the real thing, and how chili had been truly born in Texas, in contrast to barbecue, a word the dictionary said came from the Greater Antilles word barbacoa. We won a narrow victory over barbecue.

In his forty-eight years in the Texas Legislature, Senator A.M. Aiken never had a House member run against him. One of the reasons was that he was ready to help his House members' bills through the Senate, often without being asked. He, being by far the senator with the most seniority, shuffled his feet and interrupted the debate of some major legislation. For some reason, he believed that our resolution, of questionable urgency, needed to be passed as soon as it reached the Senate. This may have been because Albert Agnor was in the gallery or because we needed to get it passed before the opposition could get mobilized; whatever the reason, it passed out of the Senate faster than a Texan could cool a bowl of chili and open a box of saltine crackers.

Francis X. Tolbert, noted author and writer for the *Dallas Morning News*, invited me to Dallas to celebrate the passage of this legislation and the opening of his new chili parlor. Always ready to say a few words on behalf of chili and a free meal, I approached the opportunity with an open mouth. I drove to Dallas, where they did let me say a few words, but Tolbert, being a frugal business person, charged me for the bowl of chili.

So there you have it. With a little hyperbole, generally allowed for reminiscing elderly politicians, that is the story of how chili became the official dish of Texas.